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ABSTRACT

The unfounded and sometimes absurd attacks on television have tended to obscure many of the medium's obvious personal, social, and aesthetic benefits. It is easy to watch, and if its content does not always provide viewers with much to think about, television does not ask much of them either: they may eat, sleep, and unwind in front of it, observing the best and worst life has to offer with emotionally safe detachment. It is a private medium, consumed in the comfort of a viewer-controlled environment. Television is antiinflationary. In contrast to movies and books, the cost for which must be renewed with every new "show," television requires only a one-time involvement, after which its programing is virtually cost free. Television is instructive, and critical viewing skills are teachable. Television is also diverse: at any given time, programing from station to station ranges from the esoteric to the banal, and this variety increases as cable systems increase. The slightly larger than life quality--the rich color, sound, and location shooting of television programing--also make it a very sensual medium. There are numerous other benefits of television that come not only from its general sructure but also from the specific themes and content of some of its programs. "Roots," for example, was instrumental in helping white Americans see the black perspective. But television's greatest advantage is its capacity for change. (HTH)

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# The Benefits of Watching Television

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# THE BENEFITS OF WATCHING TELEVISION

Not long ago, I found myself seated next to a professor from Montana at an academic conference. Upon learning that my field was mass communications, the gentleman fixed his eyes upon me and let loose with an unexpected declaration of principle: "You know, my wife and I raised three kids, and in nearly 20 years we never let them watch even a minute of television! We don't even own a TV set. Now I don't think we missed much, do you?"

What could I say to this man? That he missed Lucy scheming with Ethel, Ralph badgering Norton, and Mary putting up with Ted? That he and his family wouldn't know Eaton Place from the Ponderosa? That they don't know who Mr. Dillon, Mr. Spock, or Mr. Bill are?

These are scarcely matters of life and death. We could all get on quite well without television, just as we could without a favorite restaurant, or even a close friend. But why should we?

Television, never exactly the darling of social critics, has come in for some pretty hard knocks lately. Marie Winn says it's an addictive drug, and Jerry Mander has even implied that TV may in some way cause cancer. Neil Postman, while disassociating himself from such "Luddite" views, has nonetheless lent his prestige as an enlightened educational theorist to the old saw that watching television weakens the mind, and thus subverts the goals of traditional education.

As I and others have pointed out at greater length elsewhere, most of these claims are based more on aesthetic prejudices and attempts to be provocative than on careful scientific research or even plain observation; indeed, many of TV's critics seem to be talking about a non-existent medium, or a medium that no longer exists in the form being criticized. (Critics persist, for example, in decrying the fleeting nature of TV images, even though the home video recorder now makes these images as retrievable as books.) I can thus report that, of the long procession of articles and books on the dangers of television I have come across, I have yet to find even a single convincing argument that television is socially detrimental, or that any of us would be better off watching less of it.

But that's only part of the story. For the hullabaloo over the unfounded and sometimes absurd attacks on TV has tended to obscure many of the medium's obvious benefits. That watching television could be of value should come as no shock -- especially if you believe as I do that most people, though fallible, usually end up doing what is good for themselves, especially in day-to-day affairs over which they have some control. But it is long since time that the benefits of television be publicly acknowledged and explored (especially in scholarly circles). I think we will find that these advantages, to be sure, are relatively minor in the grand scheme of things; and indeed I would place television well behind the alphabet, printing press, and telephone, although somewhat ahead of the motion picture and radio, in the great parade of communication

inventions that have transformed our world. But television nonetheless provides much personal satisfaction, some surprising social dividends, and even aesthetic enrichment to its legion of viewers.

## Personal Benefits

Television is easy. According to the Puritanical outlook which still permeates parts of our culture, the only things that are worthwhile in life are difficult to obtain or accomplish; in this view, then, the ease with which we may be entertained and informed by television counts among its worst evils. But common sense and basic psychology tell us to the contrary that, in a world in which most of us are embroiled in a variety of personal and professional challenges, the unchallenging respite offered by television is one of its greatest assets. Most of us, after all, are treated rather roughly in the real world, where our successes are few and seldomly clear-cut, and our powers of choice and expression often checked by forces beyond our control. In this milieu, the finger-tip facility of television serves as a valuable decompression chamber -- a safety zone in the combat of life, from which we may coolly witness and contemplate disasters in the news, or call up, sultan-like, all manner of images and words to amuse us. That the content of these programs is all too often shallow is regrettable, but perhaps inevitable seeing as how their purpose is not to stimulate but to soothe. (It is interesting to note that the one currently popular program that does have intellectually stimulating content, CBS' Sixty Minutes,

is shown at the end of the weekend on Sunday evenings -- a time when most people have the least need to unwind.) If TV often gives us little, it is well to remember that it asks of us even less: we may eat in front of it, sleep in front of it, turn our backs to it, and in general carry on as if it wasn't there, which is precisely its advantage. Of course, were TV the Trojan Horse its critics claim it to be -- if its illusions were indeed addictive substitutes rather than diversions from real life, which impaired rather than refreshed our ability to cope -- then its convenience would indeed be cause for alarm. But unlike any addiction known to humans, television is almost as easily turned off as turned on; in fact, it is surely easier to shut off the set than walk out of a movie or restaurant, quit our jobs, or disengage from most interpersonal situations. This means that the convenience of television is controllable, and hence indeed a convenience not a threat.

Television is private. I don't know about the rest of you, but my wife and I have a dismal track record when it comes to going to the movies. Somehow or other they must see us coming, and we invariably end up sitting in front of someone who has whooping cough, laughs at inappropriate moments, or, worst of all, provides a shot-by-shot narration of the movie ("See that girl in the black scarf, Abe? She's the murderer. Abe? ... Are you sleeping?"). Although watching television in the privacy of your home and family certainly provides no guarantee that the viewing will be undisturbed, at least at home you have a fighting chance -- you can ask an offender

to please keep quiet, without running the risk of a public brawl. There is, moreover, a certain dignity in being able to sprawl partially or shabbily clothed in front of the TV, knowing that no strangers can see us; and this freedom permits a more total involvement, if we wish it, in the media presentation. The issue here, as with all of television's benefits, is of course one of choice: at times we do wish to be seen, dress for an occasion, and mingle in public; but television allows us to go public in private, to obtain entertainment usually presented in public without the concomitant social requirements. Again, if watching television at home obliterated rather than offered an alternative to public gatherings, then TV might indeed pose a serious problem. But with attendance records being broken at baseball games, block-buster movies, and even Broadway plays, the public forum seems in no imminent danger. The advent of television means only that we are no longer obliged to go outside to be entertained and informed.

## Social Benefits

Television conserves energy. As I have indicated on other occasions, I think that excessive emphasis on conservation can cripple rather than encourage the development of new energy sources, and new sources are surely the only long-term solution to our energy shortages. But I am certainly not in favor of squandering energy -- which is what we often do when we drive to a movie rather than stay home and watch one on television. Even if we were able to walk to a local movie house (not very likely, since, as critics

correctly point out, TV has all but eliminated the neighborhood theater), we would still be subsidizing a structure which has to be heated, lighted, air conditioned, etc., and thus wastes energy by duplicating services more efficiently provided at home. Television (along of course with telephone and radio) is a pioneering technology in the movement of services from outside to inside the home -- a revolutionary shift which encompasses more than the delivery of entertainment, and which theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Arthur C. Clarke, and more recently Alvin Toffler(The Third Wave) see as culminating in the conducting of most business and education in the home via computer hook-ups, etc. From the standpoint of energy usage, this means that anytime we leave the home for the primary purpose of obtaining or dispensing information(sitting in a classroom or in front of a typewriter in an office) rather than having a live physical encounter with the environment(swimming in the ocean or holding someone's hand), there is a potential for saving energy by the introduction of a technology that moves information instead of people to and from the home. Thus, television's presentation of entertainment and news in our living rooms provides more than the significant psychological benefits discussed in the last section: television offers an immediate way to save energy, and, more importantly, serves as a working model for the bringing of information to people rather than vice versa, which should be of much use to our society in the near future.

Television is anti-inflationary. It is possible to divide the mass media used in the U.S. into two categories: radio and TV on the

one hand, and books, newspapers, phonograph records, motion pictures, and just about all other media on the other hand. The distinguishing characteristic is that in the case of radio and television we purchase only the initial equipment and receive programming through it virtually free of charge (the small expense being for the electricity, batteries, etc. needed to run the equipment), while with all other media we must purchase or rent (as in going to the movies) every new "program." The implications for inflation are obvious: a new color TV set may cost about $500 -- no give-away, to be sure -- but the additional cost of what we see on this set will be the same this year, next year, the next, and so on: virtually nil. The same claim, unfortunately, cannot be made of other media, nor indeed of most other products and services in our society. Critics of TV will of course object that programs on commercial television are not really free at all, since advertisers who sponsor these programs pass the cost of this advertising on to consumers by raising the price of their products. But this kind of argument is incorrect for two reasons: (a) advertising existed before and without television (and radio), and even if all ads were banned from television, or if TV itself were abolished, advertisers would still hawk their products to the utmost in print media (which would command higher rates in the absence of electronic competition), and continue to pass these costs along to the consumer (did the cost of cigarettes go down, for example, when cigarette ads were banned from TV and radio?); (b) consumers can outwit advertisers by deliberately purchasing non-advertised, generic products wherever possible at lower

prices. Thus, although I agree with Milton Friedman that our economy can best be improved by increasing production rather than worrying so much about inflation, I certainly don't think that inflation (along with squandering energy) is a good thing, and I therefore include among TV's great advantages that it does indeed provide us with one of the only almost-free lunches available.

Television is instructive, and television is teachable. These benefits are of course highly personal as well as social; I include them here because being well informed is perhaps more crucial to our society as a whole these days than it is to any individual. Television is usually attacked as being a singularly uninformative medium either because it fails to inform us of everything (an impossible expectation), or fails to inform in adequate depth on some issue that the critic finds of special importance. Both of these criticisms are of course undeniable. But it is equally undeniable and even self-obvious -- at least to me -- that TV does an excellent job informing us in many areas, some surprisingly esoteric. In the past few months alone, for example, I saw a program on Einstein which finally helped me understand his conceptions of space and gravity (if not yet of time); a show about Picasso which, I must admit, led me to appreciate his work for the first time; and a rerun of the old Mike Wallace "Biography" series which gave me some interesting insights into Wendell Wilkie. Speaking of politics, I might add that, although I agree that TV coverage of political issues and politicians is in most respects woefully superficial,

television does instruct us about politicians in at least one way that no other medium can: the shifty eyes, the sweaty forehead, the involuntary non-verbal cues which help us judge a person's honesty or dishonesty are all there for us, if we choose to see them and heed them, on the living screen. Part of the problem here is knowing television's strengths and weaknesses, identifying those areas in which the structure of television enables it to make special contributions; but this power of discernment can fortunately be easily learned. Indeed, one of the least obvious attributes of television, but one with very much relevance to educators, is that television is teachable: students can be taught critical viewing skills, ranging from the technicalities of shot selection to the truth-value of camera angles, and such understanding obviously magnifies the lessons that television can give us. An additional advantage of such viewing skills is that, once imparted, they are self-perpetuating -- once we know what to look for, each new television program, even each new commercial, becomes an occasion for noticing a visual dissolve, for recognizing how background music plays on our emotions, for testing, sharpening, and expanding our critical perception. Television thus teaches itself. It is a medium remarkably open with its secrets, a kingdom of knowledge that all but gives up its keys for the asking. As long as we persist with an education system which, despite a few recent forays, still emphasizes print as the sole legitimate conduit of scholarship and valuable information (and please note that I am not arguing against print, but only against its use to the effective exclusion of most other media -- to wit, children spend a lot of time in school learning how to read, but little or no time learning how to watch television), we will be underutilizing a most valuable source of information, and one uniquely able to convey

something of the kaleidoscopic quality of the current world.

## Aesthetic Benefits

Television is diverse. Last night at ten o'clock an old Clark Gable movie, a new made-for-TV movie, a local news show, two inane situation comedies, a Yankee baseball game, and a program about Isadora Duncan were on television. Although TV is often assailed for appealing to the "lowest common denominator" (whatever that is) by programming in a single, monotonous dimension, the fact is that never in the history of the world has as wide a variety of aesthetic forms and shades emanated from a single source. That the majority of these emanations are admittedly dribble does not deny the presence on TV of some of the finest expressions of human spirit, and it is this presence that makes all the difference: for whereas in the past the likes of ballet, opera, classical music, and "legitimate" theater were usually the province only of the rich and upper classes, the melting box of television has put these rarities within arm's-reach of everyone. (The editor of Media & Methods, for example, tells me that his children, ages 10 and 11, have already seen four different versions of "The Nutcraker Suite" on television.) Moreover, the very mingling of great works with mindless massages on TV is a cultural plus, for this placement allows for the serendipitous discovery and appreciation of performances that many of us wouldn't choose to attend in person even if we had the time and the money. Thus, far from being a despoiler of art and culture, the convenience

of television actually preserves and perpetuates our cultural heritage as never before by making it so readily available -- even as it churns out great amounts of vapid and sometimes lurid entertainment to suit other tastes which, I suspect, include even the most highbrow on occasion. (Such unchallenging entertainment also has important psychological benefits, as explained earlier.) It is also worth noting that the fray of non-classical, competing entertainment on television can serve as a hatchery for new expressions of art, some of which, such as All in the Family, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and programs like those alluded to at the beginning of this essay, have already begun to emerge. As for upper classes who worry that the presentation of anything with aesthetic merit on so common a carrier as television tends to rob them of their cultural privilege and identity, they can find solace in a pair of jeans or the local disco.

Television is sensual. This attribute stems not only from the evocative power of TV's literal images and sounds (qualities also present in cinema), but from an interesting coincidence in the size of human faces and most television screens: they are roughly the same length (a 19 inch diagonal screen measures a bit less than 12 inches length-wise, and most people's faces are about 8 or 9 inches long). It turns out that this coincidence and its exploitation account for television becoming one of the most intense and personal conveyors of emotion ever invented -- for the small, "face-sized" dimension of the TV screen provides an ideal, life-size forum for portrayal of the human countenance, and with it the full spectrum of human feelings. The close-up shot in which a face or two takes up most of the picture -- used sparingly in film intended for larger-than-life cinema, but em-

ployed extensively since the early days of television as one of the only ways of being visually interesting and uncluttered on a small screen -- has thus made television the master of the raised eyebrow, the slightly parted lips, the moist temples, in short, the fine tunings of nuance and emotion that signal intimacy and rapport. While it is true that most television performers are not up to projecting such subtleties (many of the close-ups on Charlie's Angels and similar programs are thus wisely directed at the rear ends rather than faces of the protagonists), those performers who have appreciated the possibilities of the medium -- David Janssen, Johnny Carson, and Walter Cronkite are several that come to mind -- have made surprisingly vivid impressions upon their audiences, especially considering the unremarkable nature of much of their script material. Moreover, the fact that all of this takes place, once again, in the privacy of the home, with viewers the same distance from faces on the television screen as from faces they might talk with in person, enhances the illusion of interpersonal encounter--the essential artistic supposition that the speaker is talking to you. (See, by the way, Joshua Meyrowitz's penetrating essay in Inter/Media, edited by Gumpert and Cathcart, for a general discussion of such factors as shot size, camera angle, viewer distance from the screen, etc., and their effects upon viewer perceptions.) Of course, the sensual power of television can just as easily further a shampoo ad as a Shakespearean play, and advertisers cynically use this power to the fullest in their attempts to manipulate our behavior. But it is not really all that unpleasant to be seduced, especially if we know the ulterior motive of the seduction and are thus in a position to countermand it -- i.e., enjoy

the ad but don't buy the pitch or the product. So we come again to the importance of critical viewing skills, which not only heighten our ability to learn from television, but enable us to pick its roses without getting too stuck by its thorns.

## Concluding Remarks

There are of course numerous other benefits of television that come not only from its general structure but from the specific themes and content of some of its programs -- the viewing of Roots by over 100 million people in one week, for example, probably did more to help white Americans understand the perspective of black Americans than 30 years of civil rights marches and Supreme Court decisions. But the most important advantage of television, in the long-run, does flow from one of its general characteristics, indeed, a characteristic not only of television but of all media and technologies, which has often been overlooked: technologies are not static entities: they change, they evolve and, more to the point, are evolved by humans to human specifications. If the state of our technology is a good deal less than perfect, this is because human life itself is less than perfect. But the potential here, though by no means easily attainable, is for improvement -- development, in the case of television, of new forms that allow for greater viewer control and choice of programming, more intelligent presentations, fewer commercial interruptions, in sum, new forms that remedy some of television's current deficiencies, and preserve and add to its benefits. The home video recorder, mentioned at the onset of this essay, is one

example of this evolutionary process which has already made some of these improvements available; another development still in the planning stage is the use of fiber optics and computer technologies which have the capacity of putting thousands (!) of different commercial-free channels on everyone's TV (though viewers will have to decide whether they're willing to pay for such cable-like service).

I am not so naive as to think for a minute, however, that critics of television like the professor from Montana, or Winn, Mander, and even Postman, would be at all swayed by these descriptions of television's benefits, or think any better of TV even if they accepted the benefits described here as bona fide. To the contrary, most critics regard any real advantages of television as so much more reason that the medium should be feared, as bait that makes the hook more attractive and palatable. So the view that television is dangerous is one which no evidence can count against, and which no person who wishes to continue holding can be argued out of. Philosophers of science refer to such views as superstitions. It is thus interesting that here in America where sizable percentages of the population have given up physically habit-forming substances like cigarettes when told of their ill-effects, the torrent of dire warnings about the effects of watching television has had little impact on viewers. I suspect that the people know what the critics don't, that the worst crime that television is guilty of is being enjoyable.